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# Made Lovely by Sorrow

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# **Made Lovely by Sorrow**

Devin McDonough

Poetry Capstone

Spring 2017

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Rot-gut

4am is a new record.

He's beat his personal best,  
creeping in like an old dog  
that knows he fucked up.

This time he tastes like whiskey.

He silences me, a bitterness  
chews at my lips. His tongue  
strokes me into submission  
before I can ask questions.

That dull burn gnawing  
at my throat when he pulls away  
tells me it's the cheap stuff.

## What I Really Wanna Say Is

I.

Football sucks.

I don't get all the tackling  
and screaming.

But then I'd miss Sunday afternoons  
on the couch, and your warmth  
when you squeeze me  
after a touchdown.

II.

You drive me crazy  
dragging me out of bed  
to jog at 6am. Can't the calories  
wait until the sun comes out...

But then I'd be waking up alone  
(making breakfast alone, again).  
A slip of paper on your pillow  
saying *be back when I can*.

III.

I hate seeing you sad.  
Shuffling around the house  
in week old sweats and tangled hair.

But then I'd miss how you rest  
your head on my lap, the cute crinkle  
in your nose, and that you chew the inside  
of your jaw when you cry.

Adelaide

She was beautiful  
last night  
with no rhythm tattooed  
on her forehead,  
bouncing off beat  
to every song.

I was too drunk  
and she was there  
with me over the trashcan:  
her smooth palms on my back  
helping me puke.  
She brought me ginger ale.

The next morning in class  
she was there  
in her usual seat by the door.  
She was still beautiful:  
Those same soft hands fidgeting  
with her mechanical pencil  
as she leaned in to ask  
if I was feeling better.

Rot-gut II

Your stupid face  
got me thrown out  
the bar last night.  
I thought I saw you  
looking up at me  
from the bottom of the glass:  
sexy, still mine,  
dripping in yes.

I saw your chin peering  
just above the meniscus,  
so I downed you shot for shot  
trying to catch up, wanting  
to feel you inside  
me one last time.

The cab driver didn't like  
you either. You smelled  
bad on his carpet.

Facetime

I recall my day through fuzz,  
rough stops and starts:

*went*

*class*

*ate*

*had*

*rehearsal.*

Her almond eyes crawl  
from the screen, wide  
as she tells another wild story:

*dogs*

*chased*

*raining*

*mud*

*tripped*

Poor connection keeps us brief.

Frozen mid-laugh  
and fixed in stillness,  
she grins with lips parted  
revealing cavities  
I never knew she had.



Fortune Cookie Wisdom

I.

Today is your second chance.

II.

Love like clockwork—  
it'll be worth every second.

III.

Get out of the house,  
not everyone is crazy.

IV.

One day you will find  
the right words  
and they will be simple.

V.

Death is not your enemy;  
it's life that such a tease.

VI.

You should have applied  
to that job. Too late now.

VII.

Call your mother.  
Tell her you love her.  
She could die tomorrow.

VIII.

It's not him; it's you.

IX.

Make public your flaws  
and rectify your sins.

## Rot-gut III: Date Night

Three martinis in,  
unable to stand  
the silence—

You say, “you look pretty”

*No, not pretty.*

*I want you*

*to find me beautiful,*

*anything, just not*

*“pretty”—to notice*

*the brown highlights*

*and \$60 I spent on this dress*

*or the missing 10 pounds*

*to linger*

*in your bloodstream,*

*to fall in love*

*with the way I look tonight.*

*The hairs on your arms saluting*

*on sight, and nothing to say*

*except wow.*

But you reek  
of boredom and better  
things to do: looking past  
me, hypnotized by the red  
paisley wallpaper against my back.

In the same breath, you yawn  
and ask the waiter  
for another round—  
something stronger.

Razor

My boot smashed against the plastic.  
The hard edge of my heel snapped  
the handle—separating head and body.

A jagged corner  
of the blade accidentally  
nicked the fatty tissue  
of my thumb  
when I picked it up.  
Kernels of blood peered  
from beneath the flap of skin.  
(At least it works)

I welcomed the sting  
of metal on my wrists,  
snagging on bits of hair  
and flesh. The red cascaded  
down my arms, racing  
toward an old Wendy's napkin  
keeping stains from Mama's  
clean carpet.

## Proximity

No arousal like the pitcher's grip  
of my left hand over a slippery  
Granny Smith apple while my right  
quickly filets. The blade brushes  
my knuckles as it drops up  
and down, its touch grows intimate  
as it reaches the core—  
running out of apple,  
inching closer to my skin.

Or the rapture  
that comes from bringing  
the flat-iron to my crinkled  
grass like hair, testing how high  
I can crank the heat  
without burning my scalp.

Close Call

They strike our rear  
tearing along I-75.

Mama's purse flies  
off the backseat  
to join us up front.

Pieces of tail light  
smack and crunch  
on the concrete.

She swings her arm  
toward me in the passenger seat.

In a rush,  
they disappear behind  
smoke and traffic.

A forcefield to keep me  
from charging head first  
through the glass—  
She knows she's stronger  
than seat belts.

2427 Wythe Ct.

*She'll be comin'*  
*round the mountain*  
*when she comes*

I sing, plopped down  
in my forest green  
kiddy chair, waiting  
for Mama on Granny's  
porch.

My heart jumps  
at the noise of an engine  
in a full crescendo  
rounding the corner.  
But it is not her black truck,  
her smiling face behind  
the wheel, or Powerpuff Girl  
cushion in the backseat.

No, strangers pass  
looping around the soft curve  
of the street. Torture in slow  
motion as the wrong cars  
linger—gently caressing  
the belly of the cul de sac.

I lie in wait  
for Mama,  
wishing I could tell time.

At Midnight

*Be nice or his eye'll kill you dead.*

(mama's so dramatic)

Sweet Balor, misunderstood,

came to visit me

swapping stories of sinners,

how we loathed the sun.

All the while duct tape

strapped to his Tell-Tale eye.

(because maybe mama was right)

Tucked in. Over edge

dangling foot, he flicked

my toe—his *see ya!*

til next time.

Can't

sleep.

Someone new, uninvited—

Boogeyman...

nosy Baba Yaga?

Yes, must be, shriveled old hag—

Granny pokin' her ugly face

(Ungodly hour!)

through the crack

in my door.

## The Voices

Hector, the tiny man  
with a squeaky voice, needlessly  
screams conspiracy theories  
while I rock back and forth  
scared but fully convinced:

*OJ had a partner...*

*Shakespeare is a fraud.*

*Is that Tupac sitting across from me?*

*Anne Boleyn was innocent.*

He's competing with the older  
and much louder Myrtle in my right ear  
hurling bitter insults:

*That hair-do is a no.*

*Why would you leave dressed like that?*

*Did you even try today?*

*I swear I don't have lice—*  
my instant response  
to the critical eyes all over me  
as I smack my head around  
trying to shake loose  
my unwelcome guests.



## Hermit

Another day of napping  
until 6pm, rolling over  
to my roommates  
laughing  
and hot grease crackling  
as they prepare  
another 'house' meal.

I watch from the crack  
in my door like a child uninvited  
to the grown up's table:  
silent, in awe of what I'm missing.  
I can never get my headphones  
loud enough to cancel  
out their fun.

No one is coming  
to ask me  
if I want steak  
or conversation.  
I take the lunchable  
from the mini fridge  
and begin the trek  
back to my bed—  
clearly marked by the impressions  
from my slippers  
rubbing the carpet raw.

## First Funeral

Mama thought it ironic  
that he was never here  
and that now she had to be.

To spite him one last time  
she settled in the back pew  
close to the exit.  
She moved only once,  
tip-toeing to the casket:  
she said she wanted  
to be certain her father  
was really dead.

In three hours  
only a single tear  
fell from her face  
and like a bead of sweat  
she slid it away  
with the back of her hand.

She looked down at me,  
her dimples betraying everything  
I thought I knew about the day.  
She smiled; I expected her to ask  
me if I wanted ice cream.

Another Father-Daughter Dance

We are imposters:  
mother's boyfriend and daughter.  
He is too dark to be mine.  
I am too light to be his.

Girls dance atop their father's feet  
so close, familiar.  
My cheek presses to his belly button,  
arms slack to my sides.

Girls whisper  
in their father's ears:  
*He's not the same man from last year.*

Inheritance

I fed her a false grin  
when she insisted:  
*you are just like your father.*

A bitter sting,  
her lip upturned in disgust.

*You have his muddy brown skin,  
the same naps and kinks  
springing from your roots;  
his teeth: perfectly aligned except  
for that hideous gap.*

*He gave you that cataract,  
damning you to wear glasses!  
You had such a pretty face...*

Stuck to that plastic sofa  
I hated Granny  
for mocking me. But  
I've never seen his face,  
so I just nodded  
taking it all in as truth.

Mulatto, *adj.*

Such an ugly shade  
of brown—  
something not natural

*brownie*

*borderliner*

*mutt*

like drops of chocolate  
sauce staining  
a glass of milk

*those things should never mix*

maybe,  
an acquired taste.

Anniversary

Granny says, "I miss my friend."  
Her fingers like bristles sweep  
dust from their first photo  
as husband and wife.  
She grips the worn image  
so hard it creases—her veins  
scare me, bursting from  
her pruned hands.

He died 10 years ago today.  
I remind her of him:  
the way I say y'all,  
the chestnut mole above  
my left elbow, the slight  
dimple in my chin.

Looking at me hurts,  
so she stares at Papaw in  
his brown suit, her head  
against his coral pocket square.

Loveland, Ohio

*I spent my early years in Ohio.*

I was raised with bees.  
Every Spring we played,  
wagging around  
my grandpa's farm.

*I got older; my mother and I moved away.*

Years have passed;  
I seldom visit.  
The bees have died,  
my grandpa's gone with them.

*I visit. Someone else owns the land now.*

Returning home  
I avoid the fields  
and the new hives,  
afraid of being stung.

## Notes

The title of this collection, *Made Lovely by Sorrow*, comes from the poem “The Singer” by Irish poet, Louis de Paor.

Rot-gut (I-III): The titles refers to raw or poor quality liquor.

At Midnight: This poem is in the style of John Berryman’s *The Dream Songs*. There are several mythological references in the poem: ‘Balor’ (Irish-Demon/God of Death), ‘Boogeyman’ (Middle English-Monster/Demon), ‘Baba Yaga’ (Slavic- Witch).

Mulatto: The title refers a person of mixed white and black ancestry, especially a person with one white and one black parent, or the offspring of a horse and a donkey.

Loveland, OH: This poem is loosely inspired by Matsuo Bashō’s style of seasonal haikus.



## Author's Notes

When I began the capstone course this semester, I will admit, I was nervous. I knew that this collection of poetry had to be my best at Skidmore. This was a mantra that I had not for any accolade or academic purposes, but primarily for myself. I looked back through my folders and saw that over my four years here I have taken five poetry course—four of which were writing intensive. As I recall my previous work I can say proudly that my poetic style and voice has only gotten stronger as I moved from class to class. It was my goal that this collection would continue that trend, that these were poems that I could be proud of as I end my time as an English Major.

Halfway into the semester I realized that these poems started to share a pattern: family. It was by no means intentional. I tend to not write poems about my family, partially because I find it hard at times to capture the nuances of those specific moments or family members. Other times it is just too raw, too fresh a memory to truly tackle from a safe distance. The other half of my poems this semester were quite internal, which is where most of my poetry resides. Only this year I found that I could tap into something deeper, dare I say more truthful in my focus of internal feelings and familiar experiences. I have long had the habit of hiding behind rhyme schemes and metaphors—shielding the true emotions behind a lot of fluff, and giving only the reader enough to get an idea. For the past year or so I have let go of rhymes completely in my poetry, and particularly this semester I have tried to use metaphors as a supporting character in the poems and not as the star. I give partial credit for this shift in style to this final semester of being a senior. I have been in a state of realizing I have nothing else to lose, so why should I not put everything on the line and take bigger risks with my content. The biggest aide, however, was from my time working on the mainstage theater production *Balm in Gilead*. We began the rehearsal process at the end of January and finished our run April 23rd, so I have been acting in

this production and writing my capstone side by side for months. English, namely poetry, was my first artistic love. It was the first medium I found that truly let me—a self-diagnosed social-introvert—say what I needed to say while maintaining a level of anonymity. Theater came later. I auditioned and attended Stivers School for the Arts in Dayton, Ohio for six years from sixth grade through twelfth grade. It was there that I studied as a theater “major”—finding a new voice for myself. Theater for me, was as academic as writing, because it was a class I went to every day for 6 years, just like English.

Since graduating high school I have had an on-again/off-again relationship with theater. I made the conscious decision not to be a Theater Major in college, and to return to my first love of poetry. I have always kept my foot in Skidmore’s Theater Department, but trying to keep that passion alive while focusing academically on my Poetry and other English classes, there has never been a proper balance of both in my life—and for the first time in 4 years the balance was there, and so was my drive, inspiration, and motivation. It was like high school all over again, going from English class to theater rehearsal. It was the most *me* I had felt in a very long time and thus I think my writing flourished. So much of this theater production was about finding family and solace in unconventional places, and like the title of this collection says: being made lovely by sorrow. Somehow and somewhere between this class and the mainstage I found time to participate in The Feminist Monologues for the third year in a row. Altogether, it was invigorating and challenging to be pushed mentally and physically for 3 months as an actor and writer because it fueled me and helped to refocus myself when it came to write my poetry. I do not think I could have ever gotten myself to a place emotionally where I felt safe (or comfortable) to write poems like “Another Father-Daughter Dance,” “Razor,” or “Inheritance” if not for the emotional and psychological obstacle course I went on this semester.

In addition to my reconnection with the theater, this has also been a big time for me musically. Admittedly, and unfortunately, I do not read a lot of contemporary poetry. My biggest inspirations are Poe, Dickinson, and Plath, as well as many other poets long passed away. Thus, I am not always up to date with what is fresh, popular, or not working in the current poetic world. My alternative has always been music, another one of my passions. Since this has been such a taxing semester, I have found comfort in the music of several indie-alternative-singer songwriters, because I find them to be some of the best poets I know. Specifically, the music of Keaton Henson (“No Witnesses,” “How Could I Have Known,” and “Lying To You”); Jake Etheridge (“Getting Over You” and “Summer Storms”); and Gavin James (“Nervous”). Each of these artists—or poets—as I would argue share the same quality for being unabashedly honest, to the point that their music is quite heartbreaking and soul reaffirming. I realized that I wanted my poetry to be doing a similar thing, if not for my readers, then at least for me. Once upon a time my poetry did that, but I think I lost focus in trying to satisfy a workshop class and professors, that I forgot why I began writing poetry in the first place: not because I wanted to write these words, but because I *needed* to.

Trying to reach that point of honesty and realism was difficult, and I fumbled quite hard at times. The temptation is always there to stop myself short before I have truly tapped into the marrow of the poem, and some of my poems do reflect this. Other poems I feel, are the evidence of a time when I let go of self-censorship and allowed my poetry to speak for itself rather than telling the readers how they should feel. The intimate workshop forced me to confront many of my habits and tendencies head on, and the quick turnover of poetry, coupled with my intense rehearsal schedule all made for a Devin I had been missing. I knew there would be times when I was exhausted or too depressed to say what I needed to say, so those were the days where I put

in extra work on the poems as to not let those limitations show or to not let the poetry suffer, rather as my training in theater has taught me: put it on the text. Take what is happening in the moment, or past experiences you can speak on openly and honestly, give name to the parts of yourself that you would much rather bury underneath flowery language and incorporate it into the work. I know the poet's voice is not always akin to the speaker of the poem, but these poems feel like the closest thing to who I am as a person than any of my previous poems. I believe that as I organize this portfolio, that this *is* in fact my best work at Skidmore, but it was not without its obstacles and I am a much better writing for having struggled to produce this work.